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**Author:** Maria Kefallinou

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Photo credit: Elsie Newmane

**Program counselor Janet Hedlund works with GED student Ricardo Sanchez to create a “return plan” with assignment options.**

One of our program counselors wrote, “In the beginning of February 2008, I presented our persistence orientation to the evening GED class. I emphasized the program’s desire to help students achieve their goals. I mentioned that we could develop a home study or distance learning program if someone was unable to continue coming to class and had to ‘stop out.’

“After my talk with the class, John, a GED student, approached me and said, ‘My heart has been so heavy these past three weeks trying to work overtime at my job and come to class. I want to give you a hug for giving me permission to take some time off.’ John requested work to take home. His teacher and I set up a series of assignments, and he would check in with me each week as he completed them.

“When John returned to class, I interviewed him to learn more about his persistence. ‘If you hadn’t given me a chance to stop out, I would have had to drop out,’ he said. According to John, these factors helped him return: (a) the counselor’s weekly calls—they kept him motivated and connected to the program; (b) flexibility of the return date—he anticipated returning March 1, but he returned on April 1; and (c) his home study helped him not to feel lost when he came back to his class.”

### **Background**

Quinsigamond Community College’s Adult Community Learning Center is located in Worcester, Massachusetts, and offers ESOL and ABE/GED classes. The program serves approximately 400 students

# The Learner Persistence Project at Quinsigamond Community College

by Maria Kefallinou

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Maria Kefallinou is program manager for the Adult Community Learning Center, Quinsigamond Community College, Worcester, MA.

per year who reside in Worcester and the surrounding towns (urban area). They come from the United States, Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa, and Europe. The Learner Persistence Project was made possible through a grant from the New England Literacy Resource Center at World Education, funded by the Jessie B. Cox Charitable Trust and the Nelly Mae Education Foundation, and by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

### The Issue

Our ABE/GED program has historically had low retention and persistence. Students often left before the end of the year or before accomplishing their goals, many times without letting us know. We did not have a formal system for staying in contact with and supporting the continuous learning of students who stopped out; neither did we have a formal process for re-entry. The Learner Persistence Project allowed us to establish processes that would help our students persist long enough to achieve their goals and that would improve our program outcomes. Because our ESOL students tend to stay longer in the program, we focused our activities on our three GED classes. In this project we wanted to find out how the persistence, attendance, learning gains, and goal achievement of our “at risk of stopping out” GED students would be affected if we provided extra supports for them.

Our definition of persistence is: “...adults staying in programs for as long as they can, engaging in self-directed study when they must stop out of their programs, and returning to a program as soon as the demands

of their lives allow. In other words, persistence is sustained participation in learning inside and/or outside of class time” (Nash and Kallenbach, 2009).

### Implementation

Our team consisted of the three program counselors, our administrative assistant, and the program manager. We met every week for the first two months of the project and every other week after that. We made a plan of activities with a time line, talked with teachers and students, visited classes, met with students, made phone calls, monitored the progress of our work, collected data, and put together the project report. We kept teachers in the loop at all times, updating them on a regular basis and talking with them about students. We considered including students on the team; however, this proved to be unworkable for two reasons: the project was too short to give us time to train and coach them, and available funding was too limited.

Our project lasted for five months, from the end of January through the middle of June 2008. We implemented the following interventions:

- All teachers and staff were informed of the project and of its work at staff meetings. Everybody was very supportive and enthusiastic.
- We considered all the students in the GED classes to be “students at risk.” We relied on teachers’ input and our attendance records to target specific students. When we saw that a student had two consecutive absences, we talked with the teacher and the student.

- The counselors visited each class regularly and met with students individually. Discussions with students focused on barriers and how the program and a student could work together to prevent stopping out. If we determined that the student had to stop out, we developed a study plan and a way for the student to come back.
- We asked students what prevented them from coming to class. The counselors co-taught a class with the teacher using Langston Hughes’ poem “Mother to Son,” from *The Change Agent*, September, 2007. In the discussion, our students identified barriers already known to us, but they also came up with another interesting one. They said it would increase their motivation to continue if they could see where they started, how far they had come, and how much they had learned. As a result of this, we asked the teachers to make checklists of the skills they taught in each level. Students could then check off skills as they were mastered. (See example in Figure 1.)
- We developed a student *persistence orientation* for the GED students and for any new student placed in a GED class that spring. The persistence orientation (now part of our regular orientation) includes questions that trigger lively discussion about motivation and goals, realistic expectations, and barriers. It lasts about an hour. These orientations helped newly placed students to better understand program expectations and then to make reasonable

***OCC/Adult Community Learning Center***  
**PRE-GED CHECKLIST FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS**

Competencies/Skills*	Taught	Learning	Mastered	Comments
Identify/describe character(s), setting, and significant changes				
Identify literary devices as appropriate to genre				
Paraphrase or summarize plot				
Describe/compare characterizations (e.g., stereotypes) and motivations				
Make logical predictions/inferences about characters/conflicts; provide evidence				
Identify the author's message/theme and explain how it is developed				
Explain why a literary device is used in text				
Compare/contrast changes in the tone/mood; explain why				
Use facts, details, or ideas to answer questions				
Paraphrase/summarize major events/key ideas				
Organize key ideas to show relationships between them (e.g., cause/effect, etc.)				
Identify the main idea of individual paragraphs				
Identify the overall main idea				
Identify author's purpose and provide evidence				
Distinguish facts from opinions				
Identify multiple effects from a given cause				
Make and support predictions, inferences, or conclusions				
Identify the author's techniques that set the tone/mood (e.g., figurative language, choice of words, etc.)				

**Figure 1**

\*Skills adapted from the English Language Arts ABE Curriculum Framework, Reading Standards and Benchmarks, Level 4, Advancing, Draft, 2007. Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, Adult and Community Learning Services.

adjustments to their plans (See Figure 2.)

- We identified resources and supports available to students (books, Web sites, and other ABE programs).
- We followed up with students who had already stopped out of the program to offer them an opportunity to connect and come back. We were able to contact very few of them, which reinforced the idea that we needed to connect with them before they stopped out.
- We asked students in the GED classes to look after one another and support the newly placed students. The counselors and teachers checked with new students before class and at break time.

## Findings and Discussion

We served 93 students in our three GED classes in the spring of 2007; in the spring of 2008 (the year we

implemented our project), we served 71 students.

Overall, we noticed a huge difference between the data from spring 2007 and spring 2008. (See Table 1.) We were surprised at the scope and depth of the project's impact on our program—on the staff, on the students, and on our processes (orientation, attendance, enrollment, curriculum, and teaching). Although we were very happy with the results, we are very cautious in our interpretation. In fact, we cannot make a solid one-to-one correlation between intervention strategies and results. For example, learning gains improved dramatically from 13% in 2007 to 44% in 2008. It is only fair, however, to point out that other factors were instrumental in this increase: the testing plan we put in place in 2008 allowed us to post-test 48% of our students in comparison to 26% in 2007, thus enabling us to capture more educational gain; and one of our GED teachers was new

in 2007, when retention in her class was very low. Retention in her class improved greatly in 2008.

We define *completion* as attending classes until the end of June and/or achieving a set goal, i.e., attaining a GED or getting a job. We believe that the project definitely played an important role in the tremendous improvement in completion rate, from 46% to 65%.

Furthermore, we all experienced a huge difference in student behaviors, attitudes, and relationships, as well as a stronger sense of community. Most of the students opened up with us and discussed potential problems. Relationships between students and counselors, especially, became stronger and friendlier. The sense of community grew, particularly in the three GED classes, as students made themselves available to help newcomers. After all the discussion about persistence and goals, our students felt very proud when they achieved a goal and reported it to their teachers and counselors.

We experienced a considerable change in staff and program attitudes toward students who had to stop out. Although we never intended to make it difficult for students to come back to our program after they had to stop out, we unintentionally did not make it easy either. We lacked a plan that would support them and bring them back.

Project results showed us that all the interventions resulted in a stronger sense of community, better relationships with the students, better designs for processes that impact the students and classroom operations, and better knowledge of our program and its potential.

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### *Persistence Orientation*

We let everyone know how important each one of them is for our program.

We ask them why they are here (we expect them to talk about their goals).

We ask them how long they think it will take them to take the GED test and when they plan to do so (we expect to talk about realistic expectations).

We explain to them how our program knows when a student is ready (assessments, teacher evaluations, etc.).

We tell them that according to our experience a number of students will stop out of the program before they are actually ready to take the test.

We tell them that according to research (Quigley, 1998) all newly-placed students are at greater risk of stopping out in the first three weeks of classes. (Most of them find this hard to believe.)

We ask them what barriers they had to overcome to come to school and what barriers they think may become critical in the future.

### Figure 2

## Challenges

The data do not really convey the size of our team's effort. These interventions take time. Our counselors spent more than 39 hours meeting with students—checking with them regularly in class, meeting with them individually, talking with them on the phone, and talking with their teachers.

A second challenge is the frustration of trying unsuccessfully to contact students who have stopped out, whether because of a disconnected number or because calls were never returned.

## The Future

By the project's end, we definitely wanted to implement the results in our program operations and in all of our classes (GED and ESOL).

- We have included the persistence orientation piece into our program orientation and added a substantial discussion on program and student expectations the very first time students come to class.
- We have worked on a list of options to offer to students who need to stop out. It includes lending them books and VCR tapes to take home, setting up home study schedules, giving class homework, and tutoring when possible. Distance learning options include a list of online resources for GED practice, use of PLATO (GED preparation software they can use from home),

**Table 1**

Outcomes for Spring 2007 and Spring 2008

	Spring '07 93 students	Spring '08 71 students
Attendance rate	72%	76%
Completion rate	46%	65%
Learning gains rate	13%	44%
Goal attainment rate	61%	77%
Hours of independent study	N/A	35
GED attainment rate	25%	28%
Hours team met with students one-on-one	N/A	39 (33 minutes per student average)

and enrollment in the Distance Learning Program funded through the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. The Distance Learning Program allows enrolled students to work online from home. The course Web site is available to students 24/7 to get assignments and feedback. Teachers are available via e-mail and phone for individual help; face-to-face tutoring is offered as needed.

- Our teachers give their students checklists of the skills they will learn in their classes. The students keep track of what they are learning and have a visual picture of their progress.
- The three counselors, the administrative assistant, and the program manager have regular monthly meetings.
- We talk about persistence in our classes, in staff meetings, and in discussions between counselors

and the students. The counselors talk with teachers to identify "at risk" students.

- We have adopted managed enrollment. This was not one of our listed strategies, but encouraged by our results, we decided to implement it in September. We do allow a student to stop out and then come back according to the plan.

The original grant was small, but it was crucial to our understanding of the issue and to planning and implementing our activities. Now we have incorporated these strategies into our regular work. We address persistence issues in our regularly scheduled staff meetings, and the counselors address persistence (barriers, stopping out, etc.) in their meetings with the students.

Overall, the persistence project enabled our program staff to see processes in a different way and make necessary improvements.

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